THE REPRIEVE

BY MAY HARRIS.

Continued from Page 1.

and Dr. Alexander were the only ones who knew of Harold's engagement.

She drove through the quiet Madderley streets on an afternoon of shining stillness. It was the first of March and the front yards of the houses along the street were yellow with a wonderful array of daffodils and buttercups that met the warmth of the sun with the abundant promise of spring.

Miss Bailey's yard about her shabby little house had no daffodils, but there were violets—row upon row—and clumps of the vivid crimson bloom of the Japan quince.

Mrs. Carstairs went slowly up the steps and knocked at the half-open door. She shrank in every fibre of body and spirit from the interview—from telling the girl that she knew, and from the dread of what Rose Marsh might do or say. To share her grief with this alien woman would be hard indeed, and to remind herself that Harold had loved her did not make it easier.

Miss Bailey herself opened the door, and Mrs. Carstairs could see nothing in her manner that indicated knowledge of why she came. The little dressmaker, with her bent, untidy figure, the flat bosom of her dress stuck full of pins and needles, her spectacles, her wispy, sandy hair, was her usually polite, almost servile, self. She led the way to her sewing room, evidently thinking that Mrs. Carstairs had come to see her about possible work. But her visitor paused.

"It isn't sewing, Miss Bailey, that I've come about. I want, please, to see youd niece, Miss Marsh."

Certainly, Mrs. Carstairs. I'll just take you into the parlor. It's all shut up—let me open the windows. Rose hasn't tidied up things—she hasn't been feeling right well lately. I'll go right straight and tell her. She was just putting on her hat to go somewhere when you knocked."

"I—won't keep her long," Mrs. Carstairs promised."

As she waited she threw back her veil and her sombre gaze took in the veneer, the imitation, the cheap pretense of the room. Those pictures! Her work, of course, and equally, of course, impossible. Impossible. Was it the girl's vanity, or her aunt's affection, that preserved the abnormal examples of her "art?"

In her swift inventory Mrs. Carstairs caught her breath at the sight of other things that did not belong to Miss Marsh's "art." She knew instantly who must have given them, and her face contracted as she looked.

They were all on a table near one of the windows; very simple things—a bust of Keats—how well she remembered Harold buying it in Rome!—some books, not new, and a folio of etchings. They seemed, these small, and yet sufficient evidences of his one-time presence here, withdrawn to an isolation from the rest of the room, making a sort of oasis in the midst of a dreadful wilderness of crude pictures, plush-covered mechanical rocking chairs, and the assortment of leatherette albums and decorated china lamps.

The mother felt a sob rise in her throat as she looked. The things grouped on the table were representative of Harold, symbolical; their relations, their comparison to the other objects of furniture and decoration was of a compelling significance. They were parallel, these inanimate things, to the case of Harold and Rose Marsh.

The door behind her opened and Rose Marsh came in. She had taken off her hat and her soft dark hair framed a face that would have been quite beautiful but for its gravity and the troubled expression of her eyes.

"Your aunt told me you were going out," Mrs. Carstairs rose and held out a formal hand. "I won't detain you long."

Rose Marsh flushed. "I—was going to see you," she said in a low voice.

"I had expected you—would come," the older woman returned. The words sounded cold and forbidding even to her own ears. She had a vision of Harold's accusing eyes—a mute turning away of the spirit, just as he had done that last evening. She could not bear it, and the sharpness of the memory made her take the girl's hand.

"My son had just told me," she added with difficulty. "I was writing to you that afternoon—"

To her wonder, Rose pulled her hands free and stood back.

"Don't, don't!" she cried. "I can't bear it!"

"Oh, my dear!" The tears rushed to Mrs. Carstair's eyes and she held out her arms to the girl. "You cared—like that!"

It changed everything to her—the girl's sincerity, the depth of grief in her voice. It was a bond, and she no longer wished to refuse it. In the revulsion of feeling she could prefigure a consolation, a companionship in her acceptance that might put human warmth into her dreary future.

It was on this mood, tolerant, changed, almost tender, that the girl's next words fell like a blow.

"It's because I didn't care for him," she slowly confessed, "that I feel it so now."

Mrs. Carstairs' shocked recoil was instant.

"You—didn't care!"

"I didn't love him," Rose Marsh said. Tears rose to her eyes and her mouth quivered with a feeling absolutely real.

The regret pierced through the older woman's angry wonder. She was still standing and Rose pushed forward one of the atrocious chairs.

"Won't you sit down? There's so much I'd like to say to you—if I can!"

"About—my son?"

"And myself." She sat facing Mrs. Carstairs, erect and nervous, as contrasted with the older woman's perfect poise and grace. The difficulty it evidently was for her to proceed appealed, though she would not meet or help it, to Harold's mother.

"We had—been engaged," the girl began, looking down at her clasped hands, "for three months." Mrs. Carstairs leaned forward with an exclamation. "It was my fault." Rose lifted her eyes as she explained. "I wouldn't let him tell you—because—"

"Because—?" Mrs. Carstairs waited.

"Because I knew you wouldn't approve; and I—" she paused again—"I wanted to see if I couldn't be—couldn't grow into the sort of woman you could approve—"

Mrs. Carstair's face changed a little. "But—you said you didn't love my son?"

Rose repeated it. "No, I didn't love him—"

"Then why—"

"Did I want you to approve? Because I knew it would make things easier for me. I wanted it to be easy—all of it—"

"You mean——?"

"That I was going to marry him for what it would mean—money, ease; the power to do what I wished."

She stopped, and her breath coming quick and hard as in a tensity of struggle with herself, stared beyond Mrs. Carstairs in a straight, unseeing gaze.

Mrs. Carstairs' sheer wonder hesitated and then found an incisive voice: "I can't think why you tell me this——"

"No, I suppose not," the girl's eyes came back as from an immense distance. "It's because I have to be honest—have to confess it. I have such a shame of myself——"

"He believed in you——" Mrs. Carstairs had her half question and Rose met it rather piteously.

"Oh, I'm afraid so—altogether. But I was going to tell him— You know he was on his way here—that day——"

"You were going to tell him you didn't care!"

"Yes, I was going to tell him. Oh, I knew it would—hurt him, but I had to; I couldn't risk the future."

"You didn't find him—lovable?"

"I wish I could make you understand," Rose said gently. "Harold would have understood!" The tears rushed to her eyes, and she put her hands over her face, helpless for a moment with the sobs that rose in her throat.

Mrs. Carstairs watched her in a sort of numb sympathy.

"It's hard to—tell you this, for you dislike me." Rose at last commanded her voice, and Mrs. Carstairs defended herself with a little flicker of passion.

"It can't be strange—even to you," she said, "that I don't like the woman my son loved—whom he wished to marry—and who didn't care for him!" She added bitterly: "On her own confession!"

"No, it isn't strange," Rose answered at once, "and, outside that, there are the other reasons—the reasons why I wished to marry your son; they are the ones that make you object to me the most!"

"As——?"

"This!" Rose's gesture swept the room—its pretenses, its poverty. "All of it! Myself, my people—my whole environment. I grew to understand it after the first."

"The first'?"

"My dear Miss Marsh," was the only beginning she could make on her difficult way.

"At first I was—pleased. My vanity was satisfied. But I found there was something I couldn't cross——" Her eyes looked beyond Mrs. Carstairs, and, dimmed with tears, shadowed as they were, Harold's mother unwillingly saw something in their depths she had not expected to find—a sudden, unquenchable flame of spirit that was free of crudity and did not waver. "I thought at first my lack of the things I wished for could be filled and that would be enough—but it wasn't. You see, I began to find out things."

There was a strained silence Mrs. Carstairs did not try to break.

"Harold lent me books—he talked—and I began to see things dierently. There was so much I'd thought I understood—but I hadn't. All I knew was wrong. It's terribly involved; I wish I could make you see. I think I thought it was possible that I could be what I wanted to be just through him—Harold; not by my individual effort. You see, I knew that wasn't in me."

Her gaze, direct and grave, met Mrs. Carstairs'.

"I knew enough to know there was no talent in the work I did—the daubs my poor dear aunt thinks so beautiful. I had tried to cheat myself, but I couldn't. There's that line of Keats'—how Harold loved him!—'A thing of beauty is a joy forever'! My work couldn't ever be that."

Mrs. Carstairs couldn't restrain the question, though she was conscious of its cruelty:

"Did Harold like your work?"

"He liked everything I did, I think; even that. You see he—cared for me."

"Yes," the mother's bitterness could only emphasize the words, "he cared for you!"

"He thought, I think," Rose took up the subject, "that I loved it—painting, I mean—that to study abroad was the great thing for me, my great desire. It was one of the things he liked best to talk of—our life over there; the things he would show me, the things I'd do. I wasn't honest—it seemed easier, somehow, to let him think I cared so for the work—that I had high aims. I couldn't seem to let him know it was the difference that I wanted—the life he could give me away from this."

Again Mrs. Carstairs' glance reaped its harvest of the impossible room, and her mind's eye on a swift flight took a survey of the girl's equally impossibly narrowed life. She found herself saying it aloud:

"It wasn't strange——" The girl kept her face turned away.

"No, it wasn't strange for me—Rose Marsh." Her voice had an undefinable accent that mingled pride and pain, and it forced Mrs. Carstairs' interest to a new surprise. "It was very natural for me as you know me," there was a very slight emphasis on the second pronoun, "but as I told you, I began to—grow."

She got up and went across the room to the little pile of books on the table that seemed to the boy's mother so touching, so sacred a reminder of him, and took one of the worn volumes in her hands.

"This," she said, "is his Browning. He didn't give me new books—he brought me those he'd known and loved himself—the very volumes he'd made acquaintance with himself. He read me things—and then I read myself, and reread, and read again!—This is his Keats"—she laid her cheek for an instant against the red-brown leather of the little book, and again Mrs. Carstairs' eyes blurred. How often she had seen Harold reading the beloved little volume.

"Here's Amiel's 'Journal'," Rose went on, "and Tennyson, and Matthew Arnold, and Stevenson's 'Letters.' I read them—the little reading I'd ever done before!—and I knew I couldn't cheat Harold. He was worth too much—pure gold——"

"Yes," the mother followed breathlessly, "pure gold——"

"And I was—copper." Rose touched the books again, pushing them into regular rows. "It became a burden I couldn't bear—living up to him, I mean. I had begged him to wait a few months before telling you of—the engagement. He didn't like it, but I told him I wanted to get used to it—to have it for a little just for ourselves. But as time went on I began to see—I couldn't let him barter," she hesitated and took the old phrase, "his pure gold for what I had to give."

She looked across the room at Mrs. Carstairs.

"I wish you could understand—I did grow. There were things I hadn't taken account of—things of the spirit." She drew a deep breath, and her fingers clasped and unclasped nervously.

"I must tell you. That afternoon I was writing him a letter—I couldn't bear to say it—asking him to let me break our engagement. I kept it—the letter. I couldn't even send—I was going to take it to you to prove that I was—not altogether selfish and bad—" Her voice broke pitifully.

Mrs. Carstairs did not notice the paper, but she went to the girl and took both hands, holding them tightly.

"You understood him, like that, and you could feel—could analyze!—and yet you couldn't love him!"

Continued on Page 11.